

**“CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND OUTCOMES:
THE TENNESSEE PERFORMANCE
FUNDING EXPERIENCE”**

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INTRODUCTION

The current decade has proven to be an exceedingly unstable period for higher education, marked by the tensions of rising tuition costs and diminished levels of state support through direct appropriations for higher education. The prosperity experienced by many states during the 1990's has passed and been replaced by fiscal uncertainty characterized by declining trends in state appropriations and an increasing reliance upon student fees to offset these decreases. Parents and students have become responsible for funding a larger share of the support for higher education. As a result of increasing fiscal uncertainty, many institutions and state systems of higher education routinely struggle to make ends meet, simultaneously attempting to respond to volatile demographic changes that yield significant growth in new entrants to higher education, an emergence of new constituencies, and an ever-changing technological marketplace that demands graduates with skills to support the knowledge economy.

As the pressures on colleges and universities have increased, accountability has become the watchword of the legislative movement toward direct involvement in the activities of higher education. Through a formal auditing process, an increasing number of states have turned to an evaluation of outputs as a means to monitor the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of their institutions and state systems of higher education. Traditionally, the most direct tie between elected officials and the campus leadership is the fiscal chain that connects the two entities. Consequently, many of the principal components of the budgeting process – incremental adjustments, formula calculations, peer institution indices, performance standards, special allocations, fee revenues, etc., have come under heightened scrutiny as states weigh current needs and project future demands on state coffers.

The recent and increasing concern with the public accountability of higher education in the United States is undeniable. In response to the concern for accountability, an increasing number of states have turned to an evaluation of outputs as a way to monitor the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of

the schools in their systems (Burke and Associates 2002). Furthermore, the trend among public policy makers is to move away from reliance on enrollment-driven funding formulas towards funding policies that link institutional appropriations to the ability to document desirable educational outcomes and results (Lucas 1996). In light of the major economic and social changes occurring across the nation, students, parents, legislators, administrators, and policy-makers alike consider a quality higher education a fundamental prerequisite to obtaining employment in today's complex and competitive job markets. Thus, increasingly more sophisticated higher education consumers are demanding information on the quality of programs and services schools and colleges provide, notwithstanding the increasing cost of obtaining a higher education (NCES 1996). As a result, state legislators and community leaders are called on to assess the performance of higher education, which in turn has put increased pressure on state governing bodies for the assessment of student learning. Regional accrediting agencies, led by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), have increased demands for assessment-based accountability (SACS 2001) as a prerequisite for initial accreditation and re-affirmation of both public and independent institutions.

The concern with institutional and educational quality is further magnified by national trends of rising tuition costs. In an era epitomized by *U.S News and World Report* rankings, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's *Measuring Up*, and other benchmark reports, state legislators and community leaders are increasingly calling for policies to assess costs along with the fluid concept of educational quality. In turn, there are increased pressures on institutions and state governing/coordinating bodies to assess the return on the investment that students, parents, and taxpayers make in post-secondary education.

As a result of these policy developments, assessment and the improvement of student performance have been the focus of much public discourse regarding colleges and universities. Over the past decade there has also been a corresponding progressive growth in the number of postsecondary institutions engaged in some form of student assessment (Erwin 1998). A considerable amount of faculty and administrative time and effort has been invested in promoting, supporting, and implementing student

assessment. Postsecondary institutions throughout the nation continue to search for more appropriate and effective strategies for student assessment and for credible evidence to guide their efforts (Peterson et al 1999).

Tennessee provides a unique example of a state that is able to chronicle a long-term history of documented success with an assessment driven policy designed to stimulate instructional improvement and student learning. Since 1979, the Tennessee Performance Funding Program has offered financial incentives for meritorious institutional performance at public colleges and universities across the state. The program has provided the citizens of Tennessee, the executive branch of state government, the legislature, higher education officials, and faculty with an ongoing system for assessing and tracking the progress of publicly funded higher education (Banta et al 1996). This formal assessment program is designed to stimulate instructional improvement and student learning as institutions address their respective missions. By encouraging instructional excellence, the Performance Funding Program contributes to continuing public support of higher education as well as promotes and complements rational academic planning and assessment, ongoing program improvement, and student learning (Banta et al 1996).

The value and effectiveness of the Tennessee performance funding program has been confirmed by the longevity and stability of the policy (Burke and Associates 2002). While longevity does not automatically denote success, this stability warrants a careful examination of the Tennessee program. Building upon earlier research by Banta et al (1996) and Noland and Davis (2000), this research examines several questions directly related to Tennessee's program: ¹what factors have contributed to the surprising longevity of this program; ² what are the perceived strengths/weaknesses of the program from both an internal and external accountability perspective; ³ does the program in Tennessee suggest which specific performance indicators hold significant promise for stimulating improvements on college and university campuses in other states; and ⁴ to what extent are the results from the mandated assessment activities used for internal campus improvements? The fourth question is of critical importance for educators and policymakers alike. While significant resources have been invested in performance funding assessment

programs, many scholars (Burke and Associates 2002) have recently begun to openly question the ability of such policies to drill down past the upper level of academic administration. This study examines the extent to which the performance funding program in Tennessee has been able to create an environment conducive to the notion of assessment for results and institutional quality enhancement.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PROLIFERATION

In recent years, state-level accountability and the use of performance indicators have redefined relationships between governmental authorities and public higher education. Legislators are no longer as receptive to the notions of institutional autonomy and fiscal independence that have historically dominated the legislative/academic relationship (Alexander 2000). Policymakers, employers, and the broader public have increasingly endorsed the "accountability movement" of the 1990s, which has required the broad utilization of standardized reporting on performance indicators and shifted the focus of established financing systems from incremental funding increases or enrollment-driven formulas to funding more directly linked to clearly specified results (Gaither 1995). Furthermore, the concept of funding for results has led to the evolution of direct linkage mechanisms between state appropriations and institutional performance on specific indicators derived from state goals (Burke and Serban 1998).

As noted by Burke and Associates (2002) more than nineteen states have adopted performance funding programs. These programs represent the explicit linking of state funds to institutional performance on specified measures; they tightly tie state allocations to prescribed levels of campus achievement on designated indicators (Bogue and Aper 2000; Burke & Modarresi 2000; Zumeta, 2001). Generally, this linkage is automatic and formulaic; if an institution achieves a set target, it receives a specific amount of performance funds. As Alexander (2000) underscores, "Although many states have initiated numerous changes aimed at improving the quality of higher education, performance funding is the only budgetary reform to date that directly links financial incentives to achieved results in policy areas states consider important" (p.421).

The recent proliferation of performance funding programs has also been fueled by the growing criticism of higher education concerning the need for better and clear indicators of quality, productivity,

and performance (Burke, 1998). For McKeon (1996), the evolution of performance funding has been a natural outgrowth of the public demand for the most effective use of tax dollars. As recently noted by King Alexander, “the extraordinary interest in performance-based accountability in the United States has emanated from a taxpayer backlash against increases in public colleges spending and widespread public concern for improving institutional productivity” (Alexander 2000: p.421). As states anticipate an increase in enrollment over the next decade, policy makers will increasingly remain focused on generating creative ways to measure the productivity and efficiency of public institutions. The increased emphasis on performance-based accountability also reflects a growing national concern with identifying measurable outcomes in the educational realm, as evidenced by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*. As the growing movement to assess student learning and performance expands toward post-secondary education, this emphasis may further continue to push states to link systematized funding levels with institutional and student performance standards.

PERFORMANCE FUNDING IN TENNESSEE

Since 1979, Tennessee has pioneered performance funding for public higher education and systemized accountability by establishing a series of incentive funding initiatives based on measurable outcomes. This program provides public institutions with the opportunity to earn a budget supplement of approximately 5.45 percent of the instructional component of their education and general budget for successfully carrying out the following assessment activities: ¹obtaining accreditation for creditable academic programs; ² testing graduating students in their major fields and in the area of general education using standardized externally developed examinations, and – for additional credit – demonstrating that graduates scores at or above national averages on these tests; ³ surveying presently enrolled students, recent graduates, and/or community members/employers to assess their satisfaction with the institution’s academic programs and student services; ⁴ conducting peer review of its academic programs; and ⁵ clearly implementing the results of the assessment activities for campus improvements and programmatic revisions (THEC 2000).

Throughout the existence of this program, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission has consulted extensively with public institutions, systems and governing boards, as well as regional advisory panels to maintain the relevancy and responsiveness of the policy. Performance funding has evolved over five major cycles including a pilot phase, beginning in 1974, and four subsequent five-year cycles (see Appendix A). During this period THEC has maintained the primary role in the development and implementation of performance funding policy. Another hallmark of this program is the maintenance of continued THEC partnerships and consultations with institutions. As such, the policy has developed and evolved as the needs of the state, institutions, students, parents, and businesses and other stakeholders have changed. For example, the measures used during the first two cycles focused solely on teaching and learning issues, without any concern for efficiency, productivity, or the relationship between performance funding and institutional and statewide planning goals. However, in 1990, THEC adopted the following statement of purpose for performance funding in Tennessee:

"The Performance Funding Program is designed to stimulate instructional improvement and student learning as institutions carry out their respective missions. Performance Funding is an incentive for meritorious institutional performance and provides the citizens of Tennessee, the Executive Branch of state government, the legislature, education officials, and faculty with a means of assessing the progress of publicly funded higher education. By encouraging instructional excellence, the Performance Funding Program contributes to continuing public support of higher education and complements academic planning, program improvement and student learning" (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 1993, p. ii).

Burke and Serban (1998) observed that this statement, although preserving institutional improvement as the primary goal of performance funding, made it clear that accountability was also a priority of Tennessee higher education. Through this statement, THEC recognized the need for addressing the two major goals simultaneously (i.e., improvement and accountability) rather than pursuing one and excluding the other. One of the most recent innovative additions to the program in Tennessee is the inclusion of a variety of assessment measures aimed at internal (campus specific) rather than external accountability. This movement highlights the duality of performance funding; the policy must stimulate campus activity and initiatives while at the same time addressing the needs and concerns of elected officials and other external constituencies.

One of the primary objectives of the most recent revisions to the performance funding program in Tennessee was to “bring performance funding, campus, governing board, and state-wide planning system together on common cycles and calendars” (THEC 2000). This change facilitated the development of performance funding goals that were directly related to institutional missions and planning objectives, thereby improving the usability of performance funding to induce institutions to engage in their own local master planning and assessment activities. This shift in focus signified an increased effort in Tennessee to effectuate campus change and cultural support for greater incorporation of assessment into the curricula.

This change is significant because while assessment driven accountability policies have become popular with state legislators, they are somewhat less enthusiastically endorsed by faculty and administrators (Burke and Modarresi 2000). This limited endorsement has negated many of the benefits inherent in such programs. By their nature, performance funding programs must balance the tension between internal and external accountability. Internal accountability involves the use of assessment data for curricula development, programmatic change, and improving levels of student satisfaction. External accountability including performance data to document institutional achievement as evidenced in peer comparisons of general education, job placement rates, and licensure scores. One of the principle liabilities of performance funding programs is that they have historically emphasized external accountability while paying scant attention on ensuring that the assessments are used internally to facilitate institutional improvement. This liability was exemplified by the South Carolina experience, which clearly demonstrated that external support alone is not a precursor for public policy success. Policy makers in Tennessee were cognizant of this tension as they developed the new standards for the 2000-05 performance funding cycle. Considerable effort was taken to ensure that both sides of the accountability bridge were sufficiently addressed to ensure program vitality (Noland and Davis 2000).

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

Alexander (2000) observed that as a result of the underlying concern for improved public sector performance, outcomes based indicators have emerged as an instrument devised to improve institutional

efficiency and effectiveness. During the last decade, performance-based policies have clearly emerged as the model of choice for resource allocation to public colleges and universities. Building upon an earlier study conducted by Banta et al (1996), this research examines the following questions: ¹ what factors have contributed to the surprising longevity of this program; ² what are the perceived strengths/weaknesses program from both an internal and external accountability perspective; ³ does the program in Tennessee suggest specific performance indicators which hold promise for stimulating improvements on college and university campuses in other states; and ⁴ to what extent are the results from the mandated assessment activities used for internal campus improvements?

In order to assess these questions, the authors initiated a study of the impacts of performance funding on two and four-year public institutions in the state of Tennessee. The authors surveyed campus leaders, administrators, and legislators in order to obtain feedback from decision makers regarding their perceptions of programmatic strengths and weaknesses. Through the utilization of a broad based and diverse respondent pool, the authors were able to obtain a representative sample of opinions surrounding the performance funding initiative in Tennessee. The depth and breadth of the respondent pool allows this study to overcome many of the data shortcomings present in a similar study conducted by Banta et al (1996). Banta's study examined the perceptions of the twenty-three performance funding coordinators at each public college and university across the state. She assumed that "these campus coordinators would know the most about the reaction of faculty and staff across disciplines to performance funding and about the strengths and limitations of the policy" (Banta et. al 1996: p. 42). Although the campus coordinators surveyed by Banta had an obvious in-depth knowledge of the policy, it is reasonable to question whether these technical policy specialists are aware of external and campus-wide policy concerns such as the use of accountability findings for academic improvement, legislative decision making, etc. Therefore, in order to ascertain a more global set of perceptions this study contains an expanded respondent pool. It should also be noted that this current research effort reached all campus coordinators including twenty-one of the twenty-three individuals surveyed by Banta (1996). Therefore, because of common respondents, the study also provides a bridge to prior research.

Because of the specialized nature of this research, the authors relied upon a focused sampling technique to identify participants for inclusion in the study. The survey pool included every chief academic officer, performance funding coordinator, and director of institutional research at each public college and university in Tennessee. In an attempt to gauge external perceptions of policy success/failure, key legislators were identified for participation. The total number of respondents in the survey pool equaled 69, and completed survey instruments were received from 45 respondents. The questionnaires were distributed by mail and followed the “total design method” prescribed by Dillman (1978). Given the reasonably high response rate from each category, the authors are confident that the results provide an accurate snapshot of the perceptions of several constituency groups regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the performance funding program in Tennessee.

RESULTS

Since 1979, Tennessee has pioneered performance funding for public higher education and systemized accountability by establishing a series of incentive funding initiatives based on measurable outcomes. From the perspective of stakeholders, what factors have contributed to the 25 year longevity of this program? A descriptive analysis of the survey data reveals that several factors have contributed to the program’s longevity: a focused legislative accountability perspective; the highlighting of critical accountability areas for the general public; the rich history, acceptance, and network of support and participation in the program; and, the acknowledgement that Performance Funding compels accountability and assists institutions with the accreditation process. The identification of these thematic areas by the survey respondents reinforces the findings of Burke and Modarresi (2000) that a key element of stable performance funding programs is their ability to address accountability requirements from the perspective of external stakeholders.

Survey respondents also noted that one of the hallmarks of the program is that it has created a motivation to improve performance since external stakeholders (e.g., state officials, higher education officials, and potentially the public) have access to the results. Similarly, the external perspective of the program is also reflected in comments related to perceived positive benefits of external evaluators (i.e.,

peer evaluators) providing independent external reviewers of institutional performance. Moreover, external benchmarks established in the policy provide a basis for comparing institutional performance to external peers. These external pressures, peer evaluators, and external performance benchmarks force institutions to take a more objective view of their performance and to publicly measure their performance against peers beyond the confines and control of the campus. The level of acceptance of external and peer comparisons, and the identification of this policy element as a policy strength, may reflect the long term impact performance funding. After years of experience with these external pressures through the policy, Tennessee institutions now view them as programmatic hallmarks.

Stakeholder Satisfaction with Current Policy

Most performance funding stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the program, and this level of satisfaction is generally consistent across institutional subgroups. Table 1 depicts stakeholder satisfaction rates for all respondents and sub-groupings according to institutional affiliation, campus responsibility, and length of service. (Stakeholders rated their overall satisfaction with the performance funding program on a four-point scale including the categories of “very dissatisfied”, “dissatisfied”, “satisfied”, and “very satisfied.”) Overall, 75 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction (i.e., responded as “satisfied” or “very satisfied”) with the performance funding program. While satisfaction rates were similar among most sub-groups, ranging from 75 percent to 100 percent for these participants, campus planning officers expressed a lower degree of satisfaction with the program. Of the six chief planning officers represented in the sample, only two (33 percent) expressed satisfaction with the program. In marked contrast, all nine of the campus performance funding coordinators expressed satisfaction, and all four of the governing board respondents expressed satisfaction with the program. There was little difference in satisfaction levels when respondents are grouped by years of service.

Table 1. Stakeholder Satisfaction with Current Policy

Group	N	% Very Satisfied/ Satisfied	Mean	SD
All	45	75	2.7	0.632
University	20	75	2.65	0.671
Community College	20	70	2.7	0.657
Board	4	100	3	0
Academic	16	75	2.63	0.719
Administrative	22	72.7	2.77	0.528
Chief Planning	6	33.3	2.33	0.516
Director (IR)	7	71.4	2.86	0.69
PF Coordinator	9	100	3	0
0-10 years	16	76.5	2.33	1.15
> 10 years	25	72	2.68	0.557

It should be noted that this broad degree of overall satisfaction with the program is consistent with the prior studies focusing on Tennessee's program (Banta et al 1996; Noland and Davis 2000). However, the extremely low satisfaction level among chief planning officers is an anomaly that is complicated by the small sample size (n=6). During the 2000-05

revision of the performance funding program, the staff of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission aligned the performance funding and institutional planning cycles to strengthen the relationship between campus planning, assessment and improvement. A potential explanation for the negative responses received from campus planning officers is that this policy alignment increased the level of accountability for campus strategic planning functions that traditionally have received much less external scrutiny at the state level, thereby resulting in significantly increased workloads.

In order to assess overall satisfaction with the program, survey participants identified their perceptions of major program strengths and weaknesses. The participants noted that performance funding provided critical resources for institutions to perform assessments of student progress, attitudes, educational achievement, and promoted universal program accreditation. Content analysis revealed the following general themes related to programmatic strengths: ¹ institutional improvement, ² external accountability, ³ internal accountability, ⁴ funding incentive, ⁵ common statewide assessment tools and standards, ⁶ facilitation of peer review and comparison, ⁷ alignment with SACS standards, and ⁸ fostering collaboration among institutional departments. Highlights of open-ended responses include:

- “The program’s history, acceptance, and network of support and participation are outstanding”
- “Maintains attention on the issues of performance and evidence of such performance”
- “Financial rewards for assessment efforts create opportunities for institutional advancement that would not be present without the program”
- “Brings attention to factors other than enrollment growth”
- “It creates the potential to make the university a better place for current and future students, faculty, and staff”
- “It has contributed to a culture of assessment”

Table 2 displays the classification of open-ended responses within the central themes identified above by institutional sector.

Table 2. Perceived Core Strengths of the Program (# of mentions)

Response Content	University	Community College	Governing Board	Total
Institutional improvement	6	4	3	13
External accountability	4	5	3	12
Internal accountability	4	4	0	8
Funding incentive	2	5	0	7
Statewide assessment tools and standards	3	4	0	7
Facilitates peer review/comparison	0	4	1	5
Institutions use assessment data	2	3	0	5
Alignment with SACS standards	0	3	1	4
Informs legislators and public	0	3	0	3
Flexibility	0	1	1	2
Fosters collaboration among departments	0	2	0	2

The intent to improve the quality of Tennessee’s public higher education represents the most commonly cited strength of the performance funding program overall, followed closely by the external and internal accountability functions of the program. The incentive perspective was often

emphasized among those who cited institutional improvement and accountability measures as important aspects of the program. The greatest differentiation between community college and university respondents exists in the perceived value of the academic peer review component of the program, followed closely by the funding incentive, the alignment of the performance funding standards with SACS standards, and the ability to inform legislators and the public. Community college respondents were more likely to cite each of these as strengths compared to university respondents.

Stakeholder Dissatisfaction with Current Policy

While the Tennessee program has a rich and storied history, respondents overwhelmingly noted that the policy was not without its shortcomings. Many individuals cited concerns regarding the cost of

assessment incurred by institutions to become eligible for the incentive funding. Others noted that the policy continued to suffer from a problem area identified in prior studies (Banta et al 1996: Noland and Davis 2000), the “one-size-fits-all” notion of the standards. Furthermore, many individuals noted that because of funding constraints, the incentive nature of the policy has turned from a carrot to a stick.

Highlights of the open-ended responses include:

- “The program promotes competition rather than collaboration among institutions”
- “The program promotes gaming because the scoring techniques are unrealistic and force campuses to devise ways to maximize scores”
- “The program is very expensive to implement and continued declines in state appropriations makes it hard to pay for all of these assessments.”
- “One-size-fits-all nature of the policy does not work for all institutions. Institutional missions are not accounted for by the standards”
- “It creates an artificial, often irrelevant standard that pushes institutions to achieve things that may be irrelevant to them ... we teach to the test”

The following chart provides an overview/classification of open ended responses in these categories as delineated by university, community college, and governing board affiliates.

Table 3. Perceived Core Weaknesses of the Program (# of mentions)

Response Content	University	Community College	Governing Board	Total
Faulty assessment tools	3	9	1	13
Institutions set goals low and manipulate system	5	3	1	9
Does not account for differences between institutions	4	4	0	8
Lack of clear policy guidelines	2	2	0	4
Emphasis of state goals over institutional goals	1	2	1	4
Time intensive and expensive	0	4	0	4
Perceived as obligation, not opportunity	2	0	1	3
Campuses do not apply results	2	1	0	3
Externally imposed and politically charged	2	1	0	3
Complacency on campus	1	2	0	3
Does not reward above general appropriations	0	2	1	3

Given Tennessee’s long-standing history, the authors were surprised by the finding that the employment of “faulty” assessment tools was the most commonly cited programmatic weakness, particularly among community college respondents. Specifically, various community college respondents noted that the job placement measure is problematic for community colleges because it does

not allow for a student to choose not to be employed after graduation. Many community college respondents also found the retention and persistence measure particularly troublesome since it is common

for students to take courses in community colleges without actually pursuing a degree. Similarly, the inability of standardized general education and major field tests to measure the distinct teaching goals of institutions represents another source of campus concern.

The ability for institutions to set goals low in order to ensure attainment represents another common criticism. Many respondents remarked that institutions are keen to manipulate the system through a series of “game planning” moves. This sentiment is best captured in one respondents’ statement that, “at our institution [performance funding] means an annual report where you stretch the truth to the limits”. Several respondents claim that this tends to undermine accountability since the goal of meeting “artificial” standards seems to eclipse the aspiration to improve institutional quality.

Another of the primary weaknesses identified by the respondents is that the results of the various assessments associated with the program are not widely distributed or utilized across the campus. This finding is obviously troubling because assessment outcomes/results cannot influence the curriculum, or student achievement, if they are not widely disseminated on campus. Prior critiques of performance funding (Noland and Davis 2000) addressed the concern that a few individuals on campus were administering the program without the broad-based involvement of faculty and staff. This concern led to the inclusion of the “assessment implementation” standard promoting the college-wide dissemination and use of assessment results related to performance funding. Unfortunately, this policy initiative does not appear to have had an impact on improving the distribution of results, as less than 47 percent of the respondents report that results are widely distributed on campus.

These policy “strengths” and “limitations” findings identify two related themes for further exploration. First, while performance funding tends to be perceived as useful in addressing external mandates, campus officials also have some questions regarding the validity and relevance of the methodologies producing the data for external consumption. As such, external agencies may not always be receiving what they expect – reliable and relevant assessment outcomes at the institutional level. Secondly, while campus officials report that performance funding stimulates discussion and consideration of campus strengths and weaknesses, they also report that major mission elements are not addressed by

the performance funding standards. This may suggest that campus officials do not fully understand that performance funding was not designed to replace institutional responsibility for comprehensive assessment. Accordingly, institutions may be relying too heavily on performance funding standards for addressing institutional assessment and effectiveness requirements.

Perceived Quality of Assessment Measures and Programmatic Standards

Respondents were asked to evaluate thirteen indicators as possible measures of the quality of higher education. Responses were gauged through the utilization of a five point likert scale (very poor, poor, adequate, good, outstanding). Overall, nine of the thirteen performance funding measures did not received ratings of “outstanding” or “good” on the five-point scale by more than 70 percent of the respondents. Table 4 depicts the percent of respondents rating each standard, with assessments ranked based on the percent of respondents rating the measure “good/outstanding” or “poor/fair.”

From the perspective of all respondents, the standards addressing academic assessments received the highest quality ratings: academic program peer review, program accreditation, general education foundation assessment and major field assessment. These assessments address student outcomes assessments (general education and major field assessment) and academic program assessment (academic program peer review and program accreditation).

Table 4 Quality Standard as a Measure of Quality of Higher Education

Item	Good/Outstanding Measure	Poor/Adequate Measure	Mean	S.D.
Program Review	86.4%	13.6%	4.14	0.82
Job Placement	83.6%	16.4%	3.28	1.16
Accreditation	81.8%	18.2%	4.02	0.85
General Education Testing	78.5%	21.5%	3.96	0.64
Major Field Assessment	72.1%	27.9%	3.86	1.17
Alumni Survey	65.9%	34.1%	3.61	0.97
Institutional Planning Goals	65.9%	34.1%	3.68	1.07
Student Survey	61.4%	38.6%	3.64	0.94
Employer Survey	58.2%	41.8%	3.47	1.10
General Education Pilot	56.1%	43.9%	3.39	1.14
Retention and Persistence	55.8%	44.2%	3.49	1.26
State Strategic Planning Goals	54.6%	45.4%	3.36	1.08
Assessment Implementation	54.5%	45.5%	3.45	1.27

As detailed in Table 4, each of the assessment that received favorable ratings address traditional or long-established student and program assessments. Accordingly, these traditional academic

measures may be perceived as offering greater reliability and validity (e.g., standardized tests, review by

external peers) or comparability to other norm groups (e.g., state averages, national norms). Those assessments that received lower rankings generally address areas of processes (achievement of state goals, assessment implementation) and student progression (job placement, retention/graduation). Given the emphasis on these issues by regional accrediting agencies such as SACS, these low ratings were not expected. For example, the student progression measures (e.g., retention, graduation) are based upon common and long-standing methodologies, yet barely half of all respondents rate these as good measures. Measures of “state goals” require institutions to assess their performance in relationship to state planning goals and priorities. These goals are often viewed by faculty as accrediting and governing board mandates; therefore, linking performance funding assessment to their achievement has the potential to create campus resistance.

Overall Policy Impact

Tennessee has a long and storied history with performance funding, a history that has been chronicled by recent research (Bogue and Aper 2000; Bogue and Hall 2003). While the program has ebbed and flowed during its history, one of its long-standing strengths is that it has served as a valuable accountability tool from an external accountability perspective (Hall 2000). This finding was supported by the survey respondents, who reported that the primary benefit of the performance funding is that it promotes accountability from the external and legislative perspectives. Not surprisingly, respondents noted that the program has had a minimal impact on promoting internal campus needs, student accountability, and curriculum change. In a sense, these findings suggest some form of disconnect in that performance funding policy is generally perceived to make institutions more accountable (i.e., more accountable to external stakeholders) but the policy is also less likely to be perceived as impacting curricula change and campus needs. An explanation of this disconnect may well reside in the institutions themselves. For whatever reason (e.g., lack of time, resources, expertise, etc.) campuses may not be fully engaged in applying assessment results for program improvement. This finding is consistent with those of Russell (2000) and Hall (2000) who found that the program has minimally impacted curricula decisions, especially at the states research institutions.

One of the stated central purposes of the performance funding program is to enhance the educational programs experienced by students enrolled in Tennessee public higher education institutions (THEC 2000). If the program is promoting progress at the campus level consistent with its ultimate aim, it would be appropriate to expect program effects on several campus academic oriented constructs. Accordingly, respondents were asked to identify perceived performance funding program impacts on three institutional academic variables: campus academic climate, curricula change, and student learning outcomes.

Table 5 Overall Impact

Item	Positive impact	Limited impact	Mean	S.D.
Impact on academic climate	39.6	60.5	2.40	0.66
Overall campus climate	34.9	65.2	2.05	0.65

When asked to assess their overall satisfaction with the program as it exists under the current standards, 75

percent of the respondents reported that they were satisfied and that the program had made a positive overall impact on their campus. However, when asked to assess the impact of performance funding on various segments of their institutions, the majority of responses indicated that the program had little or no impact outside of “academic climate.” This finding suggests that the program may be viewed as academic initiative rather than a policy with broader campus implications and perspectives. This conclusion is supported by responses to a series of questions related to student achievement. Specifically, almost two-thirds of the respondents perceive that the program is having a positive impact on student achievement.

The core policy strengths identified by respondents in the open-ended segment of the survey reinforce the assertion by Bogue and Aper (2000) that a central role of the performance funding program is to address accountability requirements from the perspective of external stakeholders. Respondents report that the program creates a motivation to improve performance since external stakeholders (e.g., state officials, higher education officials, and potentially the public) will have access to the results. Similarly, the external perspective of the program is also reflected in comments related to perceived positive benefits of external evaluators (i.e., peer evaluators) providing independent external reviewers of

institutional performance. Moreover, external benchmarks established in the policy provide a basis for comparing institutional performance to external peers. These external pressures, peer evaluators, and external performance benchmarks force institutions to take a more objective view of their performance and to publicly measure their performance in terms of peers beyond the confines and control of the campus. The level of acceptance of external and peer comparisons, and the identification of this policy element as a strength, may reflect the long term impact performance funding. After years of experience with these external pressures through the policy, Tennessee institutions now view them as program strengths.

Programmatic Impact on Student Learning

In order to more directly address the effect of the performance funding program on student outcomes, respondents identified the extent to which each standard had an impact on student learning. As identified in Table 6, the percent of respondents who indicated that each standard impacted student learning was used to rank each standard. Academic assessments received the highest rankings from the perspective of their perceived impact on student learning. The top three rankings of standards are consistent with rankings of perceived quality of the measures: program review (76.2 percent), accreditation (69 percent) and major field assessment. However, assessment of graduates' general education skills (on a test taken by each college graduate) is perceived to have impacted student learning by less than 36 percent of the respondents. For universities, only 17 percent of the respondents reported general education assessment results effected student learning; in contrast, approximately half of the community college respondents noted an effect. Previous criticisms of general education assessment (lack of student motivation, lack of alignment between curricula and national examinations) led to the inclusion in the current standards of a provision rewarding institutions for meaningful pilot testing of new general education instruments. The low level of impact of the current foundation tests suggests that the pilot testing and the continual searching for alternatives tests remains a worthwhile endeavor.

The fourth rank overall, institutional planning goals, is perceived to have had a strong impact on student learning for all sub-groups except for university respondents. Efforts to encourage the alignment

of campus strategic planning and performance funding may have reinforced the academic goals which are prevalent in all campus strategic goals. Measures receiving lower ratings (placement, retention, and pilot testing) are generally less focused on academic concerns or, as in the case of the general education pilot test, the measure has not yet proven to be reliable/appropriate.

Table 6. Standard led to improvement in student learning

	All			Univer.			2- Year			Acad			Admin		
	(% Yes)	N	Rank	(% Yes)	N	Rank	(% Yes)	N	Rank	(% Yes)	N	Rank	(% Yes)	N	Rank
Program Review	76.2	42	1	73.7	19	1	76.2	21	2	75	16	3	77.3	22	1
Accreditation	69	42	2	52.6	20	3	85.7	21	1	62.5	16	5	77.3	17	1
Major Field Assessment	65.9	41	3	68.4	19	2	60	20	4	86.7	15	1	54.5	22	4
Institutional Plan Goals	60	40	4	47.4	19	6	73.7	19	3	66.7	15	4	57.1	21	3
Surveys (Student, Alumni, Employer)	53.7	41	5	47.4	19	6	60	20	4	80	15	2	4.5	22	7
Assessment Implementation	46.3	41	6	52.6	19	3	40	20	8	40	15	6	45.5	22	6
Retention and Persistence	40	40	7	52.6	16	3	26.3	19	10	26.7	15	9	52.4	21	5
State Plan Goals	35.9	39	8	33.3	18	8	36.8	19	9	33.3	15	7	35	20	9
Gen Ed Foundation Testing	35	40	9	17.6	17	9	47.6	21	6	31.3	16	8	40	20	8
Job Placement	30.6	36	10	12.5	16	11	47.4	19	6	22.9	14	10	27.8	18	10
Gen Ed Pilot Testing	10.3	38	11	11.8	17	10	10	20	11	6.3	16	11	15.8	19	11

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TENNESSEE EXPERIENCE

A broad survey of the higher education landscape reveals that most institutions are engaging in some form of student assessment. Therefore, an incentive-based program has potential to be a widely accepted phenomenon. However, such programs are historically campus initiated rather than driven by state policy priorities. As state systems of higher education rise to meet the challenges of the coming decades, they struggle with the dual challenges of serving institutional and state level constituencies and objectives. While these elements are related, state level goals/objectives are increasingly important given the intense need for states to create policies that foster their human capital potential. States are turning to higher education as a vehicle to assist in creating economic growth and competitiveness in the knowledge economy. States are also looking to higher education to create opportunities to raise educational

attainment levels, to promote life-long learning, to improve adult literacy rates, and to assist in the recruitment and retention of highly skilled knowledge workers. States are also beginning to strategically examine the means through which public funds are expended to address many of the broad objectives noted above. The Tennessee experience with performance funding reveals that the program not only promotes access, it fosters institutional and local government cooperation and the enhancement of research and development projects that support state/external constituencies and objectives.

In order to overcome resistance at the campus level to the creation of state/external accountability policies, several substantive obstacles must be overcome. The nature of “funding for performance” is the primary obstacle to successful replication of the Tennessee program. A number of states have tried to implement “punitive” performance budgeting systems. Typically, these systems remove a portion of the institutional budget that can then be reinstated through improved performance. This method can have the unintended consequence of an institution engaging in little real assessment and accepting its reduced budget. One of the strengths of Tennessee’s incentive approach is that it is designed to encourage institutional participation rather than discourage it.

Successful implementation could also be impeded through disproportionate levels of campus participation in the development and planning stages. A hallmark of Tennessee's program is the direct involvement of institutional and system representatives in the development of performance standards. This involvement helps ensure that the outcomes are meaningful from a public accountability and institutional perspective. Furthermore, this grass-roots involvement is one of the core strengths of the Tennessee program. While the legislative and executive branches have at times been involved in maintaining or criticizing the program, it has always had campus support due to the ownership that higher education feels in the standards and logistics. The Tennessee experience has demonstrated that indicators which originate at the campus level, rather than an imposed set of rigid standards, are typically more successful.

Many of the shortcomings identified by the respondents in this study serve as a reminder to state and institutional policymakers that there are often significant burdens associated with the implementation

of such programs. Obviously, serious institutional assessment, linked to campus plans and improvement activities, requires substantial effort at the campus level. Moreover, given the actual amount of incentive funds involved, the financial rewards must adequately compensate the participating institutions for the time and effort required. However, as one respondent suggested, the performance funding dollars earned are often not perceived as additional incentive revenue, these resources are merely viewed as just another part of the overall operating budget. This finding may represent a more problematic legacy of the performance funding policy - over the years, campuses may have moved away from linking the financial incentives received from performance funding to the activities at the program level. As higher education in Tennessee has become increasingly challenged financially, performance funding revenue is unfortunately being used to replace shortcomings in general operating funds.

The political climate of the state government may pose an additional impediment to successful policy implementation. Tennessee is truly fortunate that, overall, its General Assembly has allowed institutions, with the oversight of the governing boards and Commission, to guide the program. This support has allowed the program to try innovative and challenging ways of improving public higher education. Examples of such policy innovations include, but are not limited to: the utilization of campus-based general education pilots such as portfolio assessments; job placement assessments at the community colleges; student, alumni, and employer surveys; and the development of campus quality enhancement plans.

Finally, the nature of many of the assessments noted above often provide an unintentional obstacle to successful implementation. Programs that place a heavy reliance upon performance measures linked to graduation and retention rates may be politically popular, but they are often are laced with a host of confounding variables. For example, traditional measures of retention and graduation do not account for students that transfer into and/or out of institutions. Additionally, retention and graduation rates may penalize those institutions with unique and/or specialized missions. Indicators such as the amount of overall education and general expenditures allocated to support student centered programs, activities, and services; the use of technology on campus to expand educational opportunities; and, the number of

degrees conferred may prove to be a more accurate indication of an institution's performance than retention and graduation rates. As institutions continue in their quest to design and implement assessments or performance based programs, the Tennessee experience suggests that an incentive based program may be effective and sustainable if such programs contain a proper and adequate mix of assessment tools and indicators that have broad based state and campus level support.

SUMMARY

Increasingly, colleges and universities are being asked for more direct measures of student outcomes. National studies report recurring questions such as, how much did students learn, and did they complete college prepared for employment? Questions such as these resemble local debates regarding the assessment of general education outcomes, critical thinking skills, and student/alumni satisfaction. One of the lessons learned from the Tennessee experience is that faculty are often best suited to question current pedagogical practices and inform departments about advances in research that may impact curricula. Without the direct support of the faculty and their involvement with assessment, performance funding becomes nothing more than a sophisticated auditing exercise.

In addition to the internal concerns mentioned above, performance funding is central to higher education's accountability to external constituencies. The assessment standards utilized in the program were developed to respond to the rising concerns of elected officials as they evaluate investment returns on state budget allocations. Should state funding for higher education in Tennessee continue with recent trends, the performance funding program will take on an increasingly important role in core budget activities. The funds generated by this program have become increasingly essential to maintaining the base operations of many institutions. This fact alone points to a bright and promising future for the policy, a future that could easily be adapted to fit the needs of other states across the nation.

The lessons learned from the Tennessee experience provide opportunities to learn from the state's policy successes and failures. As states struggle in their effort to balance the tension between performance funding formulas and individual campus criticisms, institutional leaders must realize that their institutions must effectively meet the needs of the students for which the mission was created. The

ability of states to continue to provide the ultimate in educational quality coupled with reasonable access will be tested in the coming decades by declining state appropriations and the limits of tuition and fee affordability. While higher education may be challenged to more adequately meet the needs of the state, the development and/or expansion of performance funding models is a unique opportunity for strategic re-direction of the academic enterprise.

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